THE ISTHMUS OF PANAMA.

Story of the Every Day Life of the Present Center of the World's Interest.

It was rather a pity that while the Titanic forces were at work in the building of the North and South American continents that they did not wrench them clear apart instead of leaving the narrow isthmus of land which looks so small upon the map, but which is sufficient to change the channels of trade of the whole world.

It is but thirty-five miles between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans on the narrow land across the Isthmus of Panama. The attempt to unite the waters of the two oceans nearly wrecked a great European nation financially and has been the subject of discussion in the parliaments of the world for half a century. Across this isthmus is the great highway of the world's commerce. Even the population has no nationality, for it is polyglot. No one stays there who can get away. It is the abiding place of such human drift as lodges there and the last resting place of the many who have come from afar off full of health, strength and hope to fight an unequal duel with nature in her most vicious and insanitary mood. For a century the control of the Isthmus of Panama has been the subject of ultimatum threats and treaties not for its favor, but for the danger to the world powers in the exclusive possession of this highway by one of their number. It must also be a property in common over which any one nation cannot hold a right to the exclusion of others. By common consent of all it is ruled by the United States of Colombia. She acts as caretaker of the bridge. Her pay is the security of her possession and the right to tax the native, for all foreigners pass without toll.

Like the ribs of a fan come the steamship lines across the Atlantic to Colon on the north side of the isthmus. The trade they bring crosses to the Pacific, then divides and flows north and south, following closely the coast line. Some reaches as far north as San Francisco, more as far south as Valparaiso. In return comes back the bullion, hard woods, coffee, rubber and other native products, and they in turn go out on the ribs of the fan to all parts of the world.

MISERABLE COLON.

The long roll and rough water of the Caribbean sea makes Colon always a pleasant sight to the weary voyager. The land promises a safe footing, the hills are green, the white-roofed, wide-galleried houses suggest peace, stability, perhaps comfort, but most assuredly a welcome change, for the sea sometimes becomes monotonous and uninteresting, and does not hesitate to indulge in the mood, a privilege only accorded to things and persons already great beyond recall. The people turn out upon the dock to greet the incoming vessel. Many negroes, a few natives, a sprinkling of white men. There is always an amusing aggressiveness about a white man who lives in Colon. His manner seems to say, "Yes, I live here, and like it. Wouldn't leave here for the world. It's a fine place." That is only his company manner, however, for when you know him well and the time is favorable for confidences he will talk with large oaths about the place, and weep over his exile from all that makes his life worth living. He will tell you of his best friend who "went with the fever" last year and the other friend who "went" the year before. He will speak with reminiscent fondness of the trip he made to the states two years before and his face will brighten up with hope as he speaks of the trip he will make next year if he does not "go with the fever" before that time. Why does he stay? A shrug of the shoulders. Quien sabe? Somebody has to stay, I suppose. Might as well be me. Wouldn't be worth a cuss anywhere else, anyhow."

Colon is a miserable place. At one time it was quite presentable, but a fire destroyed its one business block and as the Panama railroad company did not need it in its business it has not been rebuilt. The town is not drained, has no sanitary provision, no drinking water fit to use and a traveler cannot get a decent meal for any price. It is not to be had.

The real story of Colon lies in the past, first when the railroad was building forty years ago and then again in the eighties, when the Frenchmen were spending the money of the canal company with prodigal hand. Today the town of Colon is dirty and uninteresting. The stranger expresses his disgust. The old resident admits he may be right, but hastens to add, "Ah, but you should have been here in '86. Then it was a fine place. Money flowed like water, men died like flies," &c. Colon lives in the past, with its few old-timers. The new-comers live in the hopes of the future. Outside of the railroad interests it is now merely the point of departure for Panama, and he who departs is generally well satisfied to do so.

IMMENSE RAILROAD BUSINESS.

From Colon starts the railroad which crosses the isthmus to the town of Panama on the Pacific side. All the business of Colon is railroad business. Any claims it may have to decency, good government or civilization are due to the rather effective and modern American management of the Panama railroad. There is quite a colony of railroad employes, nearly all Americans, and the traveler who is fortunate enough to penetrate the confines of this colony will find them a hospitable lot of people who make the best of a bad situation and really succeed in living in comparative comfort.

Residents of the isthmus are prone to boast of the fact that to them alone of all the people on the two American continents the sun rises in the Pacific and sets in the Atlantic. This is almost literally true during the season of the year, when the sun is farthest south. The Panama railroad line in going from Colon to Panama extends to the south or a little east of south. This fact, assisted by the curve of the isthmus before it joins the continents on either sets above the shore line of the Caribbean sea.

The railroad is about forty-seven miles long, the distance on air line being about thirty-five miles. The rails follow the low ground and reach the divide by very easy grades. Naturally the projected Panama canal has practically paralleled the railroad in seeking for the lowest level. The railroad itself is well equipped with modern American rolling stock and is above standard gauge, the width between the rails being five feet. As in all Spanish-speaking countries, there is a first and second-class fare, with coaches to correspond. The first-class coach is the ordinary American day coach, and the second-class is similar, except that the seats consist of benches along the sides of the car. The fare across the forty-seven miles is $4 in gold and 3 cents a pound for all baggage. In the palmy days of the isthmus the fare used to be $25 in gold. By the terms of the railroad concessions, no one, not even the government, can build even a wagon road across the isthmus, so he who must cross must ride on a train or else walk the ties.

The consequence of this arrangement is that there is no wagon road across and few walk. On each side of the track is a well-worn bridle path, along which the train frequently meets cavalcades of the small native horses used as saddle and pack animals. It is slow progress, however, and such traffic is seldom "through." It is only carried on between local points on the road.

MOUTH OF THE PANAMA CANAL.

Just as the train leaves Colon it passes to the left of the mouth of the Panama canal. The quick-growing tropical vegetation has covered the earthwork and the banks of the canal, so that it now looks like a sluggish river, centuries old, emptying into the Bay of Limon, on the shore of which stands the city of Colon. The point at the mouth of the canal is called Christobal Colon, and it is here that Count de Lesseps built for himself and his friends the houses which cost the company millions of dollars, where the real value was in thousands, and which today are abandoned to the bats and insects which swarm in the forests of the isthmus.

The first stop the train makes is at Monkey Hill, the famous cemetery where were buried the bodies of those who died during the construction of the railroad and later the canal. Nature shows a freakish mood here, for while she struck men down with cruel malignity she as gracefully and quickly removed all traces of her handiwork.

NEAR THE CANAL.

Leaving Monkey Hill the train winds through the hills, following generally the valley of the Chagres river, a sullen, muddy stream, which at most seasons is small, but when filled with torrential waters becomes a raging flood. The banks of the river are heavily shaded with impenetrable jungle of all shades of green and variety of leaf and flower. Birds of bright plumage and harsh cries fly from the trees as the train approaches. In the forty-seven miles to Panama there are thirty-three stops or stations, and it takes about three hours to make the trip. The stations are generally a store or two, a few native huts and perhaps a group of the frame buildings owned by the canal company.

The railroad is seldom more than a few yards from the line of the canal, and for a distance of sixteen miles from Colon, with the help of the Chagres river, it may be said to present quite a navigable appearance. The water is full of sharks and alligators, and near every settlement the native laundry is in operation along its banks. The women stand in the water up to their knees and wash the clothes in the running stream. These washerwomen seldom have more than a skirt on, and the train often surprises a group at their labors when everything in the line of clothing has been temporarily discarded.

THE CULEBRE CUT.

At Empire, thirty-four miles from Colon and thirteen miles from Panama, the train enters the range of hills through which the great Culebre cut of the Panama canal is being made, and no tourist has ever crossed the line without being impressed with the enormous amount of dirt which has actually been moved and the still greater amount yet to be removed before the bottom of the cut is near enough to the level of the sea for canal purposes. An impressive feature of every side track and railroad yard is the endless amount of machinery standing idle, left there by the old canal company when it stopped work ten years ago. Trains of locomotives, miles of dump cars, [illegible] under which lie acres of

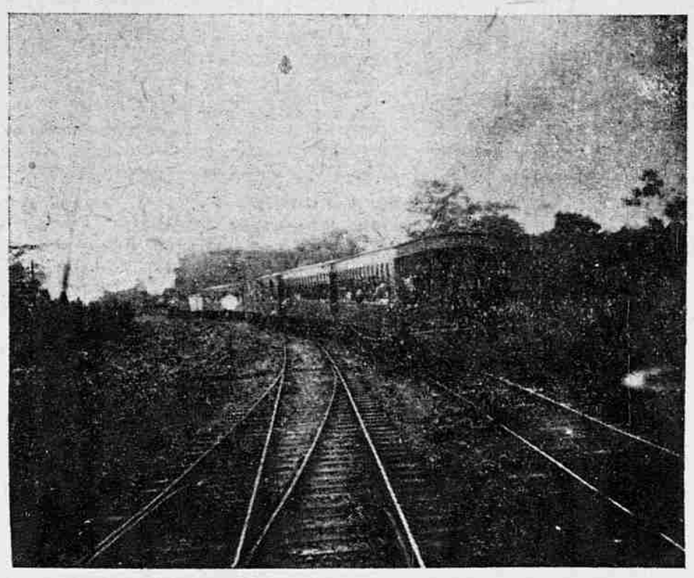

Photo by Thos. Dunn, U. S. N.
A PANAMA TRAIN.

conceivable with which dirt can be moved. Nearly all of it looks foreign to American eyes and unfortunately much of it has been rendered obsolete by later inventions.

The traveler is brought to a realizing sense of something besides the blue hills, however, as the train nears the town, for the railroad enters Panama through the most squalid section of that large and picturesque city. The squalor might be endured for the instant necessary, but the odors which accompany it can never be forgotten. They are energetic, all-pervading and indescribably vicious and insanitary.

It would be hard to find any linguistic fault with the hotel, for in the office is an Italian clerk, in the dining room Spanish waiters, the bill of fare is written in French and what nationality the cooks are cannot be told by their products. These resemble more the monstrosities and mistakes which are sent forth from the kitchen of the last class in some parts of the west in the United States.

THE CITY OF PANAMA.

Panama is a large, irregular and rather well built city. After the pirate Morgan raided old Panama, looted the houses and destroying what he could not carry away, the people took the precaution to retreat to the end of the spit of land on which the city is built and erected a great stone wall about the town. On three sides the sea washes the foot thereof and on the land side a moat was dug and the drawbridge was lifted at the first sign of an approaching enemy. Today the sea wall still stands, though there are picturesque breaches in it, but the land wall is either down or else has been incorporated into some building, for the town has overflowed its old boundaries and it is difficult to trace them. These walls may have seemed impregnable to the Panamaians of the sixteenth century, but modern gunnery would make a before breakfast job of their total destruction.

The important business of the day is done in the morning. By 11 o'clock everyone has gone to breakfast. The stores are deserted and it is 3 o'clock in the afternoon before there are any signs of renewed life. The railroad employes and the foreign element make a pretense of longer hours, but it is merely a pretense after all, for business proceeds but slowly. Toward evening the scene becomes quite animated. The parks and plazas are filled with children and their nurses, well dressed men and women saunter about. Groups of men talk business and politics, largely the latter, with many words and expressive gestures. "Panama must be free from Colombia. It has no connection. Nothing could be done to stop a revolution."

"Why is it not free?"

"Ah, the United States protects the sovereignty of Colombia on the isthmus. That is why. But for that in thirty days we would have a new republic. The republic of Panama."

The streets of Panama are narrow and crooked. Business is done on the ground floor of the houses, but every one who can lives upstairs. Many churches are filled with worshipers on Sundays and on feast days. Many more churches are in ruins from the effects of fire or the attacks of time upon the soft rock walls and arches.

REGULAR CHURCH-GOERS.

Early on a Sunday morning the church bells begin to ring and the people are coming and going from prayers the whole day long. Before breakfast the Colombian army, in full dress, which means with their boots on, goes to church accompanied by the military brass band. The band takes its station in the gallery and the 600 or more soldiers, in two columns, enter on either side of the church. The band furnishes the music, and it is not bad, but is far from the character which might be expected of the occasion. Prayers are said to the liveliest airs from "Olivette," "Fatinitza" and other light operas. The effect is pretty and novel, but not inspiring of great awe and reverence. The soldiers remain in the church about a half hour and then return to the barracks. The several hundred people who have been in the church also leave. They are mostly women, and as they leave the cathedral and cross the plaza they are met by a large crowd of young men, who line the walks of the park and stand ready to flirt if given the slightest encouragement. The Panamaian girls use their eyes very skillfully.

The soldiers of the army of the United States of Colombia are a fairly likely looking lot of men, but as they are nearly all conscripts there is little esprit du corps. The officers are young men kept out of political mischief by commissions in the army. Their duties are very light and their chief ambition seems to be a new affaire d'amour. The police of Panama are uniformed like the New York finest. An ex-police captain from New York was employed at a handsome salary to instruct and drill them in modern police ways, and he seems to have succeeded fairly well, as the Panama policeman, while slight of physique, presents outwardly a very neat appearance, and is onto every device known to the New York force for extracting blackmail from a victim. A reform mayor was recently appointed in Panama and his economies were so [illegible] went on a strike, and the city was temporarily without protection. An appeal was made to the governor and the soldiers were promptly organized into a police patrol and scattered about the city. They acted as such until a compromise was reached and the bluecoats again resumed their saunterings.

The Chinaman is an important factor in the life of Panama. He owns nearly all the largest stores and is generally prosperous. The laundry of Hop Who in the states becomes in Panama the "Lavanderia de Hop Who," but as a rule he leaves such work to the natives and engages in merchandising. The import duties on luxuries is very light and there is much smuggling, so John is able to sell many things very cheaply, compared to prices they bring in the states. He rides in carriages, lives in good houses and marries into a fair class of native people. He is not considered so good as a white man, but is better than a negro or a native, and in fact compared to his position elsewhere in the civilized world his social and business position in Panama is quite enviable. The Germans do nearly all of the banking and much of the business of Panama and nearly all of them are married into the best class of native society. The head offices of the Panama canal are here and furnish a distinctly French element to the town, one which lives much to itself, however, and is quite exclusive. In all the humbler walks of life the Jamaica negro is much in evidence.

PANAMA CLIMATE.

The climate of Panama is not especially healthful, but it is not so bad as its reputation would lead one to believe. At the end and at the beginning of the rainy season fever is very prevalent and the city is really never free from it, but if the voyager will observe the ordinary rules of prudence and refrain from drinking the city water there is little danger of contracting any disease. During the yellow fever epidemics no one knows who is to go next, and the pernicious malaria is nearly as bad, if not worse, in its deadly effects.

There is a constant stream of travel through Panama en route to the west coast of South America, between South America and the United States and Europe. Several lines of steamers handle this traffic and the register of the "Grand Central" at Panama is as cosmopolitan a work as a trip around the world. Mining interests, rubber, hard woods and even foreign politics are here represented, for it is a dull day in the lobby when an ex-ruler of some country or other is not sitting in the cafe in exile from his native land.

The employes of the Panama railroad do more work than any others, but as one man remarked, "We don't do much. We earn our salaries staying here," and, after all, perhaps they do. The foreigner who has adopted Panama as his home rises early in the morning. After his coffee he takes a drink, brandy, perhaps. With his breakfast he takes wine, between breakfast and dinner more drinks. At dinner more wine. After dinner a liquor. After the liquor more drinks, until bed time. There is more drinking in Panama among those who have the price than in any place on the two continents, and the newcomer who attempts to keep the pace with the seasoned veterans will rue the day. The Panama man will tell you that more men have died from too much drinking in Panama than ever died of the fever, and from what one sees this is not difficult to believe.

The insects of the night, the heat of the day and the discomforts of the menu are all forgotten, however, when comes the cool of the early evening. Then the lights are soft, the tropical foliage of the parks is exquisitely beautiful. The falling shadows soften the lines of buildings and hide the dirt of a people who live but for the day. The youth and beauty of the town finds its way to the public thoroughfare, to the sea wall or to the short trolley line, with its open cars. It is the social hour, the hour for love making and all the pleasant things of life, and it is then that life in Panama does not seem so very bad after all.—Panama Correspondence of the Washington Star.

"How do you account for the sudden epidemic of grafting in all departments of public service?" asked the reporter. "Grafting is neither sudden nor recent," replied the practical politician; "hunting out and exposing the grafters is the latest fad—that's all."—Chicago